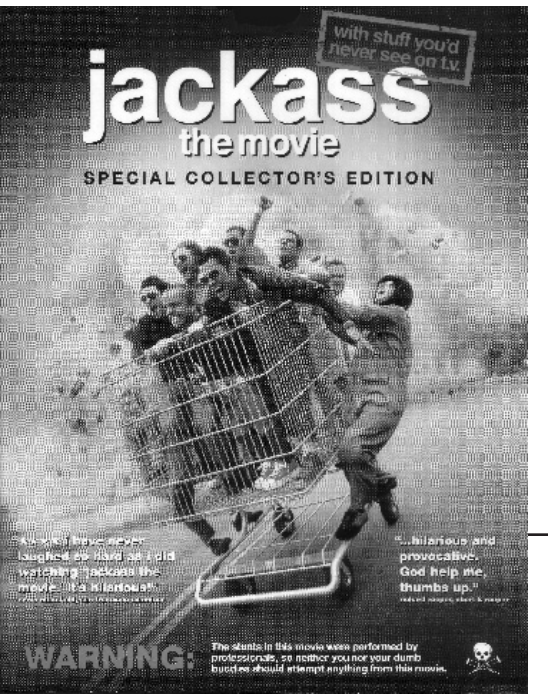
JORIE LAGERWEY

Jackass For President

Revitalizing an American Public Life Through the Aesthetic of the Amateur


with stuff you'd never see on t.v.
jackass
the movie
SPECIAL COLLECTOR'S EDITION
"...hilarious and provocative. God help me, thumbs up."
WARNING:
The stunts in this movie were performed by professionals, so neither you nor your dumb buddies should attempt anything from this movie.

A cartful of Jackasses.

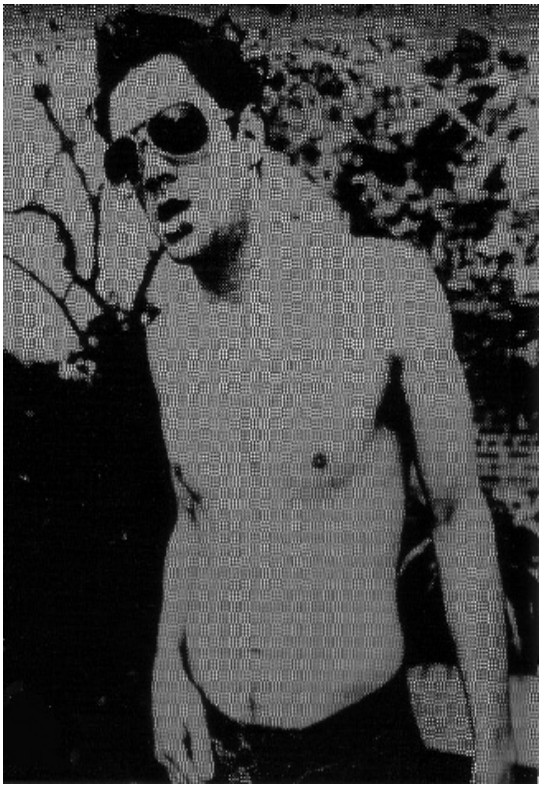
Despite their officially professional status, *Jackass*'s purposefully amateur aesthetic, including its consistent use of video and handheld digital video cameras, its ideology of collective production, its use of an urban landscape as backdrop, and its project of social intervention, relate it tightly to an American avant-garde tradition. The *Jackass* project is to manipulate its perceived position outside the mainstream to both critique the Industry (in their feature film) and more importantly, to create a public, democratic sphere in which both witnesses to filming and fans of the show are drawn to participate. Bystanders who witness filming are forced into dialogue with the space and people around them, and fans are activated by the show to participate in their own local public spaces (e.g. to tape themselves doing idiotic things) as well as to participate in a legal system often portrayed as expensive, ineffectual and unfair.

Jackass is clearly a mainstream commercial phenomenon. The MTV program and feature film now has two spin-off series (*Viva La Bam* in which Bam Margera terrorizes his family, and *Wildboyz*, in which Chris Pontius and Steve-O encounter wildlife), it has been a live touring show called *Don't Try This at Home*, and it has spawned at least five DVDs. The *Jackass* partnership with MTV and its corporate behemoth parent company, Viacom, reeks of cooptation. Certainly MTV used *Jackass* to regain some popularity with its more punk or rock oriented male audience who were alienated by the TRLization[1] of MTV and its unabashed switch from musical outlet to marketing machine. Yet by signing with MTV, the *Jackass* boys were given the

Broderick Fox, editor, *Spectator* 24:1 (Spring 2004) 86-97.

opportunity to intervene in mainstream culture and to subvert the uber-commercial, pop-music-pimping MTV brand. (The show's original run was in 2000 and 2001 when *NSync and Britney Spears were at the pinnacle of their popularity.) However, before becoming Jackasses, all the cast members were rooted firmly within an alternative skateboarding culture. While they are now officially professionals, being paid by the network to tape the crazy stunts they had been doing earlier for their own purposes, they still cling to the public's perception of them as working- or middle-class amateurs. It is the *possibility* of their amateur status, the *possibility* that they are still members of an under-heard subculture that gives their voice credibility among the show's fans.

All the cast members as well as co-creator Jeff Tremaine have skate credentials. Tremaine was editor of the skateboarding magazine *Big Brother*. He met Johnny Knoxville, at the time a freelance writer, when Knoxville pitched a story for the magazine in which he would test a bullet proof vest by shooting himself with a .38 caliber handgun. Tremaine jumped at the chance for the article, and contacted his friend Spike Jonze (who has his own off-beat reputation with directing credits for the feature films *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation*, and music videos for the Beastie Boys and Fatboy Slim on his resume) with an idea for a television show. Bam Margera was a professional skateboarder who had been making Do It Yourself skate videos liberally laced with pranks, as well as making music videos for his brother's punk band, Camp Kill Yourself (CKY). He brought with him all his friends from West Chester, Pennsylvania to round out most of the rest of the cast. Finally there came Steve-O, formerly known as Stephen Glover, who spent time making videos and doing stunts at the University of New Mexico's film school as well as graduating from Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Clown College.[2] All the Jackasses, then, have strong roots in the skate subculture and most of them in amateur video production. They use this experience



Chief Jackass, Johnny Knoxville

to reproduce a distinctly amateur aesthetic in order to position themselves as a force from the margins who have managed to infiltrate "the system" and disrupt it from within.

Johnny Knoxville and the rest of the *Jackass* crew probably did not intend to revitalize the American public sphere or to motivate viewers to interact with the people and places around them in any socially relevant way. Indeed, their skateboarding origins and frequent attacks on the status quo might indicate an anti-social project. It is precisely this marginal position and lack of authority, however, which gives *Jackass* its social power. While other reality shows position the viewer in a traditional passive role in relation to a completed, authored text, *Jackass* uses its amateurish appearance and its association with MTV to question authorship and to put the job of meaning making into the hands of its viewers. *Jackass* uses a distinctly amateur, everypunk style to spark response and public action in its young fans.

Jackass and MTV participate in a symbiotic relationship, alternative *Jackass* gaining an audience via MTV and mainstream MTV regaining some of its lost alternative culture cache from *Jackass*. At the same time, *Jackass* can be located within MTV's historical desire to portray itself as a mouthpiece of anti-establishment rhetoric. MTV programs *Ren and Stimpy* (originally aired on another Viacom network, Nickelodeon) and *Beavis and Butthead* were subversive youth culture icons in their heydays. In his essay describing the impact of *Beavis and Butthead*, *Jackass*'s alienated-youth-gone-wild predecessor, Douglas Kellner echoes common sentiment regarding both shows, writing, "The show depicts the dissolution of a rational subject and perhaps the end of the Enlightenment in today's media culture."[3] *Jackass* certainly stems from the *Beavis and Butthead* idiots run amuck mold, but by virtue of being live action and not animated, the show's cast members have more authority to act in physical space and to effect what goes on there during and after their presence. Where Beavis and Butthead seek destruction and anarchy, the Jackasses, more positively, seek to use their amateur aesthetic to force a mainstream awareness of an active margin.

Visually, *Jackass*'s amateur aesthetic includes the use of the fisheye lens held over from their skate videos, frequent zooms, and jerky, handheld cameras. It also relies specifically on unrehearsed direct address, both introducing segments and commenting to the camera during the stunts, as well as the way the backstage—whether planning and preparation or during filming—is often put in front of the camera. For example, in "The Toupee,"[4] we see the meeting in which the idea for the skit is hatched, as well as Rick Kosick shaving his head in preparation for his performance. In the same vein, in "Ice Barrel Jumping,"[5] Ryan Dunn and Bam Margera both lean close and speak directly to the camera while action continues behind them much as one might mug for a friend or family member recording a home video. We also see Margera and his ice skateboard in the background being followed by another camera. And as we watch a long shot of Dunn jumping, taken by someone off the ice, we see on screen another cameraman kneeling alongside the barrels for the simultaneous fisheye close-up.

A final key element of *Jackass*'s perception as amateur may be found in the ways it differs from seemingly similar reality shows such as *Candid Camera* or the more recent MTV entry, *Punk'd*. There is no attempt to narrativize or contextualize the stunts and pranks on *Jackass*. Letting the videos stand alone forces the viewer to create her/his own meaning, thus reinforcing the idea of collective production and authorlessness while creating a more active viewer than reality TV shows which narrativize and authorize their videos through the dominating voice of a (usually white male) host.

Many reality television shows create plotlines around competition or romance like the generic icons *Survivor* and *The Bachelor*. Even similar hijinx-centered shows like *Candid Camera* or *Punk'd* narrativize and thereby contain their own mayhem. Both these shows rely on hosts to narrate and interrupt the action. *Punk'd* is further neutralized by its focus mainly on young celebrities. While *Jackass* has made its cast famous, *Punk'd*'s host, Ashton Kutcher was given the opportunity to create the show based on his pre-existing celebrity. Focusing the show on famous people erects a barrier between participants in the show and viewers. Unlike *Jackass* on which all the cast members seem more or less like the average, working-class or middle-class viewer, *Punk'd* takes place in a distant Hollywood world that is largely inimitable and unattainable for most viewers. Finally, both *Punk'd* and *Candid Camera* set up pranks or practical jokes aimed at specific targets. Their purpose is the humiliation of those targets. If bystanders happen to walk into frame, their faces are obscured; it's not about them. *Jackass* only humiliates its cast members, and the crew chases down all bystanders and gets them to sign release forms. The show is all about the public's reaction, and this

is the major distinction that makes *Jackass* more participatory and gives it the possible political edge the other shows lack. When performing skits in public, the camera focuses on the bystanders, often zooming in to catch a look or a laugh. The Jackasses do not attempt to contain their stunts in any sort of in-studio host-driven framing device, and they never air the reveal—the moment in which they tell the bystanders that they have been filmed for MTV. For the other shows mentioned, such reveals are the key moment. These other shows want to capture the chagrin, anger, and relief of the victim/subject once the prank is contained and the world returns to normal. Such moments are antithetical to the *Jackass* project. The viewer is never allowed distance from disruption. Showing the reveal puts order back in place; cutting directly to the next segment leaves the viewer with the idea that disruption is possible.

It is valuable at this point to further distinguish *Jackass* from other programs created around amateur videos and participatory audiences, like *America's Funniest Home Videos (AFHV)*. In its original incarnation, *AFHV*, hosted by Bob Sagat, aka Danny Tanner, the loveable, sermonizing father of three from *Full House*, is a cuddly video game show in which home viewers and studio audience members vote for their favorite video and the doling out of cash prizes. These quaint videos were almost always family home movies in which some incident of pain, humiliation, or ridiculous cuteness was accidentally captured. Such scenarios usually took place within the home or on vacation (i.e. not in the mundane public spaces *Jackass* uses) and often featured family pets. They were further distanced from both the reality of their producers and any potential political value by the controlling voice over narration by Bob Sagat and his symphony of similar-sounding cartoonish voices. Any voice the videos' producers may have had was mediated through Sagat's wholesomer-than-thou persona. The whole was then further mediated by the cash contest. The cutest or most humiliating video won approval from the audience. Everything was approved by this panel of bourgeois judges, preventing the airing of anything subversive or even controversial. Notably, the obviously constructed/performative (i.e. not accidental, the ones that most approached *Jackass*) videos never won. Further, *AFHV* aired on ABC in primetime on Sunday, in the heart of family viewing time. *Jackass* airs on MTV, a vocally, if only ostensibly "alternative" channel, on cable, at 10pm or later. Also, as discussed above, *Jackass* has no authoritative voice over, no incentive structure, no living room style framing device, and no studio audience to lend it the air of institutionalization present in *AFHV*.

All these attempts by *Jackass* to maintain the audience's perception of the gang as amateur and to maintain its amateur look while commenting on the more dominant society around it, differentiate the series from other reality TV entries, arguably linking *Jackass* far more directly to an American avant-garde tradition of amateur production. Maya Deren succinctly characterizes the amateur aspect of avant-garde filmmaking. After recalling that the word amateur stems etymologically from the Latin for "lover," (and the *Jackass* boys' cackling commentaries clearly display their glee in what they do) Maya Deren writes, "the amateur should make use of the one great advantage which all professionals envy him, namely *freedom*—both artistic and physical."[6] (emphasis in original) *Jackass* relies heavily on its physical freedom; this aspect of its purposeful amateurishness can be connected to a long tradition of avant-garde artists such as Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas, who were dedicated to making mobility-reliant films like *Wonder Ring* (Brakhage, 1955) and Mekas's "diary" films of New York City or his *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*.[7] "Artistically," the Jackasses maintain as much freedom as possible from network control by keeping their budgets extremely low. They cling to the cheapest possible video and digital cameras, a decision which also reinforces their performance of amateur status, since the equipment they

use is widely available and inexpensive. In the commentaries on the movie DVD, star Johnny Knoxville, director-producer Jeff Tremaine and director of photography and co-producer Dimitry Elyashkevich bemoan an extra couple hundred dollars spent here and there for faster golf carts, better cameras or special lenses (they're fond of the fisheye so prominent in skate videos) which so often get crushed or filled with goose droppings during stunts.[8]

An interesting assertion of their self-proclaimed amateur status comes from the opening sequence of *Jackass: the Movie*. Clearly, having signed on with MTV and Paramount and having been given about five million dollars to shoot their feature, they are no longer amateurs at all. However, the cast and crew of *Jackass* are so determined to retain their *appearance* of marginality that Jeff Tremaine describes the opening sequence of the movie this way:

> This was supposed to be the big Hollywood lie. We were trying to get the whole audience to think we'd just completely sold out. We shot this bit on film and we wanted everyone watching it to think that we just went completely Hollywood… People ended up liking it, which was too bad.[9]

The sequence to which Tremaine refers was shot on a studio backlot with props, lights and special effects—complete with an aria and a giraffe (on the soundtrack and just for fun, respectively). It is a bizarrely perfect parody of a typical Hollywood action sequence, except that in this crash scene rather than the usual grisly smoke, fire and bodies, an oversized shopping cart filled with the scruffy young cast catapults into an enormous fruit stand, sending fruit, stand, and Jackasses flying in all directions. Insightfully, Tremaine equates 35mm film with selling out to Hollywood. Inexpensive video equipment and its inherent technical "liveness" (the image is captured directly and immediately on tape without the delay and distance implied in printing film) are linked with a populism and a "reality" without which the *Jackass* project would fail.

Along with their embrace of amateurish aesthetics, the Jackasses, again harkening back to both skate culture and the avant-garde, adhere to a strict policy of collective production. Like the Dogma '95 movement and the GALA Committee project, Melrose Space, *Jackass* is a community project. *Jackass* is not precisely authorless since the performers often introduce themselves at the beginning of a segment. However, their stunts are usually performed in groups, always to the laughing or heckling accompaniment of their *Jackass* confreres. Dogma[10] and GALA[11] are purposeful advocates for authorlessness in order to further their artistic or social goals and reinforce the power of the reader by removing the usual authorial power position. On *Jackass's* part, this collective position, while perhaps not consciously in service of a social project, stems from their roots as members of the same subculture and reinforces the participatory ideology *Jackass* disseminates.

Another crucial element of many *Jackass* stunts is the use of urban settings. Throughout the history of the American avant-garde, especially with the growing influence of identity politics in the 1970s and beyond, the urban landscape, especially that of Los Angeles, has been vital to the work of avant-garde filmmakers such as Pat O'Neill (*Water and Power, Decay of Fiction)*, Barbara McCullough (*Water Purification Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification)*, and Charles Burnett (*Killer of Sheep)*. In the same tradition, *Jackass* uses the urban spaces of Los Angeles, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Paris, Tokyo, London and various other unidentified cities as the backdrops for many of their pranks. Loyal to their skater roots, the *Jackass* crew appropriates public spaces for their own uses. Sometimes they still use them for skating or skate-like activities (involving shopping carts, snowboards, office chairs, etc., and early episodes of the television show still include skate boarding segments in between pranks), but just as often, within the framework of the television show and the film, they use their videos to interact with *people* in public areas.

Disrupting privatized mobility—Hockey brawling in Starbucks.

As a result they activate civic space, and force interaction among strangers who would normally blindly inhabit the same physical location without acknowledging each other.

While Maya Deren is clearly referring in her discussion of the amateur to more poetic avant-garde filmmaking and is excited about the ability to "use the movement of wind or water, children, people…as a poem might celebrate these," the *Jackass* gang uses their amateur's freedom to wreak havoc in public spaces rather than creating lyrical "art." They use the movement of people not to write visual poetry and intervene emotionally in people's lives, but to intervene physically in people's space, thus forcing them to react to phenomena they would probably rather ignore.

The utopian ideal of active citizenry and public space dates back to the Greek polis and the Roman Forum—or at least to romanticized Renaissance ideals of them. The attempt to activate social space is admittedly an exercise in nostalgia for the halcyon days of the corner store community. A return to the past will not cure all the ills of our capitalist, more or less representative democracy. Disrupting the status quo, however, sparking thought and conversation, remains a valuable project. People increasingly speed through life in a state of almost constant distraction, hovering within their technologized private domains even as they pass through public spaces like sidewalks, coffee shops, and supermarkets. *Jackass* does its best to disrupt the "flow" and "distraction" of everyday life and to replace these with performances to which one must react, whether they take place in one's physical presence or one sees them on television. Seeing a hockey fight at

Starbucks will stop a cell phone conversation just as quickly as seeing someone vomiting or defecating will stop a remote as it flips through television's proverbial flow.

With the wide dispersal and public use of cell phones, palm pilots, portable computers, walkmans, and MP3 players, Americans in the twenty-first century tend to pass through public space hermetically sealed in their own tiny, portable private spheres. In her discussion of portable televisions, Lynn Spigel modifies and updates Raymond Williams's phrase "mobile privatization"[12] and coins the term "privatized mobility." She refers to this phenomenon of insularity which she says began in the 1960s and continues today: "Now, rather than experiencing the domicile as a window on the world that brought public life indoors, the resident experienced the home as a vehicular form, a mode of transport in and of itself that allowed people to take private life outdoors."[13] This idea of taking private life into public space, and yet trying to maintain its privateness, dominates contemporary American public culture.

In a similar vein, in her discussion of the state of "everyday distraction" we experience as we drive Los Angeles's freeways, Margaret Morse describes the insulated bubbles of our cars which allow us to speed across distances, through public spaces, without interacting with anyone or being aware of our surroundings at all.[14] Coffee shops now have power outlets and Internet connections so patrons can jack-in and communicate with anonymous people across the globe rather than be forced to interact with the people sitting at their same table. Also, on any public sidewalk, in any airport or mall, people are constantly checking palm pilots or seemingly chatting into the air, as they converse on cell phones with earpieces. A sight which used to be a signifier of insanity, motivating onlookers to cross the street, now signifies a certain affluence or importance. Whatever people are doing with their mobile technologies, they are too busy to stop doing it, merely because they cohabit public space. People walk down the street in New York or Los Angeles in the state of "everyday distraction" Morse describes, enveloped in their own mobile private sphere made possible by portable technologies. Television's concept of "flow" can now be applied to the public world, which glides by us as we chat with someone in New York while strolling down Melrose Avenue.

There are so many shows now, like *Punk'd* and *Candid Camera* mentioned above, it might seem like disruption has become the norm, making people withdraw even further into their private domains. On the contrary, *Punk'd* uses trusted friends to enter the private worlds of its victims, and *Camera* uses its hosts posing as authority figures so that its victims believe they are being confronted with institutional power or ridiculous bureaucracy. Both shows attempt to create situations that seem possible and focus more on the victim's private life than on public space. On *Camera,* people are hassled, but never really disturbed. After all *Camera* is now aired on the Christian themed PAX network and its motto is "Smile! You're on *Candid Camera*!"

In contrast, *Jackass* explodes the private bubble. The Jackass crew are strangers who accost bystanders or perform outrageous stunts in front of bystanders with no context and no pretended link to possible reality. The randomness of their stunts and the extreme personal nature of their interactions (they always pose as average people, never as authority figures like *Camera*) with strangers prevents them from ever being predictable enough to be guarded against. The Jackasses disdain privacy and embrace the low-tech mobility of their cameras in order to force bystanders out of Morse's state of distraction. They use an "old school" portable technology, video, to violate these mobile private spheres and force interaction among people sharing public space. As such, they hold far greater potential than the other reality shows described in reactivating civic space and engendering non-reactionary participation in American public culture.

Sean Cubitt writes about the immediacy

of video recording and "its ability to record sound and image simultaneously, [which] thrusts the instability of the present in your face and shouts in your ear: 'It doesn't have to be this way.' " Video simultaneously awakens democratic possibilities by encouraging readers to overcome their traditionally marginalized role vis a vis the meaning of the text and to be active participants in the production of meaning.[15] The text of the show itself displays Cubitt's ideas of video democracy. For example, in the skit "Fighting Hockey Players,"[16] two cast members dressed in full hockey pads and skates walk into a coffee shop and start to fight. This total disruption of social space forces idle coffee drinkers to react to the fight and decide whether to call the cops, ignore the fight, or just sit back and watch.

Another prime example is a skit called "Broken Arm."[17] Knoxville stands on a corner of Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles with his arms in casts propped up perpendicular to his body. His pants have fallen down. He calls to random passers by, all men, to help him with his pants. With varying degrees of disgust or embarrassment, they help him. In both this example and in "Hockey Fight," bystanders interact with cast members and with each other in a novel way. "Broken Arm" shows men interrupted on their way somewhere else. One of them carries a black plastic bag as if he has just run an errand at a convenience store. He is interrupted and forced, after more than one request, to help Knoxville with his pants. His sense of privacy and decorum is so violated, that he needs to share is discomfort. As he walks past one of the Jackasses with a video camera, he says conspiratorially, "Well that was deep." The ubiquity of the amateur video equipment *Jackass* uses renders them nearly invisible, and makes the man feel at ease talking to a camera, assuming it is that of a tourist and will be thrown away or stored in someone's home video collection never to be seen again. Not only is this an example of interrupting this man's space so markedly that he feels the need to comment on it, it also illustrates Cubbit's video democracy by allowing this man to react immediately and to subsequently be heard just as loudly as Johnny Knoxville when the show is aired.

In contrast to the democratic ideal encouraged by video technology, Cubitt describes traditional literary studies as encouraging "a belief in the poverty and insignificance of the reader as opposed to the infinite richness and profundities of the text… the reader is reduced to a 'merely' subjective relation to the text…subordinate to the text."[18] Generally, Hollywood filmmaking, I would argue, falls into the same category as traditional literary studies, and much of academic film theory was born from literary theory. The only meaning publicly ascribed to a Hollywood film is that spouted off by its director and stars at press junkets or written by publicists for the studio. Viewer/reader participation is ignored if not actively discouraged. In contrast, *Jackass* empowers the viewer/reader. As far as participatory readers, *Jackass* fans are more active, and therefore controversial, than most. In addition to the usual online fan sites, there are modes of participation inscribed on the show itself. Each show (and the movie) opens with a warning to its viewers NOT to participate. While on an obvious level this is an attempt to avoid being sued by the parents of those participatory fans, on another level it is an implicit acknowledgment that those fans have had power over the producers of the *Jackass* videos. Viacom, a corporate giant, has had to change its production in response to viewer actions. The court cases themselves,[19] in which parents sued MTV and the producers of *Jackass* for influencing their children to do stupid and dangerous things illustrate *Jackass's* readerliness.[20]

A final way in which *Jackass* uses its desired perception as amateur and outside the mainstream, while encouraging involvement from fans, relates to the commentaries available on the *Jackass* and Steve-O DVDs. Unlike more structured, informational commentaries that often accompany films or dramatic series on DVD, the commentaries

Body Politics? Steve-O gets an "Off-Road Tattoo."

here consist of the *Jackass* guys sitting around watching their own videos, drinking beer, and talking about drugs and sex and their own stupidity. Listening to such unscripted, minimally edited commentaries layers another level of immediacy on top of the videos, positioning the viewer within the world of the producers—as one of the *Jackass* crew—thus reinforcing the populist mystique of the show and inviting more reader/viewer participation.

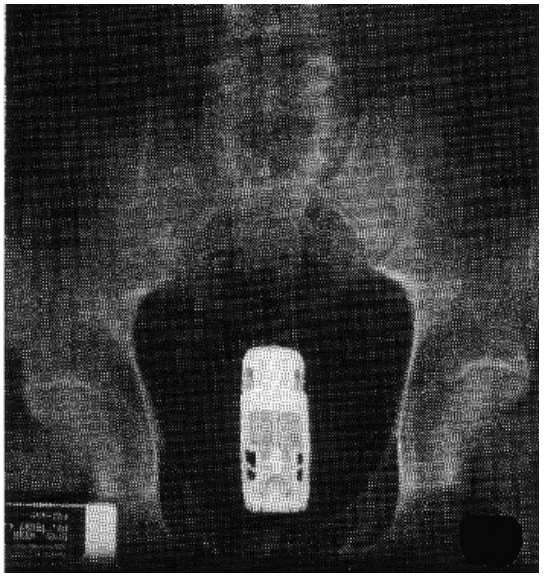
In addition to its clear ties to an avant-garde tradition, placing the *Jackass* project within the context of television studies helps further analyze its social project. Television critics have often discussed how reality TV, variously defined, alters the public/private binary, asking whether or not the genre creates a new public forum in which unheard voices can speak. *Jackass*, with its dedication to the appearance of immediacy, lack of rehearsal and populist aura, fits easily into the rubric of reality TV. The show fits both the more recent, late 1990s, early 2000s surveillance vision of the genre with the occasional hidden camera as in "Fighting Hockey Players" or the segment in which Bam Margera hides a camera in his parents' bathroom and then bursts in and attacks his father as he reads the newspaper on the toilet, as well as an earlier conception of reality TV as talk shows and video based cop/detective shows like *Cops* or *America's Most Wanted*.[21]

Bill Nichols argues that both the structure and content of reality TV (which for him, partially because he writes in 1994, is limited mostly to cop shows) discourage political/social involvement. Through repetition ad nauseum, strangeness is made banal, and by definition there is no urgent need to react to or interact with normalcy. He also claims that the segmented, episodic structure of these shows encourages political organization around the same narrative structure. Action groups form around a specific newsworthy/action-worthy event, and disband as soon as the event is either solved or perceived as solved by disappearing from news coverage.[22] *Jackass* operates in a fashion exactly opposite to the

shows Nichols describes, however. It disrupts norms, puts the unexpected and strange in banal places, and violates taboos whenever possible.

According to Nichols, "the value of the perversity of reality TV may lie in the gleeful abandon with which it mocks, or rejects, civic-mindedness and the positivist social engineering behind it."[23] *Jackass* certainly mocks with gleeful abandon, rejecting the typical middle-class mindless adherence to norms. In his assessment of *Cops*, another show born out of amateur video practice (the Rodney King video), Nichols writes that while the "threat of civic disruption is in the air" the police are in charge and easily reassert order, proving that "the system works." On *Jackass*, the threat of civic disruption is not idle, but "the system" rarely gets involved. The most serious threat to the Jackass order by law enforcement comes in "Bounty Hunter," [24] in which Bam Margera and Brandon DiCamillo are arrested for disturbing the peace and impersonating an officer, respectively. DiCamillo, charged with a felony, is truly frightened. This is a potent and alarming disruption of the *Jackass* project by "the system." With the Jackasses in jail, their mission of social disruption has failed; the Man, the dominant ideology, has asserted power and won. The intervention of the dominant social order is brief, however, since as the police cruiser pulls away, we hear a familiar voice from the front seat saying, "Oh, by the way, I'm Johnny Knoxville and welcome to *Jackass*." The Jackasses have addressed their own worst fears while openly mocking the possibility that the social order, in the form of law enforcement, could hinder their project of social intervention.

In discussions of democracy and social space, the metaphor of the body is often applied to society—the body politic. On *Jackass*, the white male body, standing in for the body politic, is violated and damaged in every way imaginable. Ordinarily the symbol of patriarchy or a general dominant conservatism, this homosocial group of white men, in a more personal aspect of their social



An actual Jackass—Ryan Dunn's "Butt X-Ray."

project, is acting out the mainstream's self-destruction. They commit acts of violence on themselves, sometimes recruiting friends, bystanders, or even professionals to inflict pain on them. Taken together with their attempts to disrupt social spaces, or reclaim them for alternative public uses like skate boarding, the violence against their own bodies can be read as metaphorical violence against a phallocentric regime and against their own complicity in that dominant order.

Feminist theorists often discuss the use of the body to violate taboos and assert power by disrupting dominant ideals of female beauty. Kathleen Rowe, for instance, discusses Roseanne as an "unruly woman" who is able to assert power through the grotesqueness of her obesity and loudness. She thwarts standard norms of female beauty and social position within the home and family.[25] The Jackasses similarly revel in the leakiness of their bodies, zooming in on running noses or creating stunts around vomit and feces. In the *Jackass* aesthetic, nothing can or should be contained. Bodies are unruly, and the physical body, like the body politic, is not sacred or inviolate; it in fact *should* be disrupted whenever possible. Steve-O's "Off-Road Tattoo," in which he rides on an off-road

course while getting a tattoo (which ends up looking like a bruised, bloody, black patch on his arm), and Ryan Dunn's "Butt X-Ray"[26] (in which he inserts a toy car in his rectum and gets an x-ray in order to see how the doctor will react), both involve their stuntmen invading their own bodies in a direct parallel to other cast member's more overt invasions and disruptions of the social body.

Jackass is largely reviled by parents, senators (Joe Lieberman has publicly denounced the show), and a popular press that, in reviews of the film, often expressed chagrin at having enjoyed it so much. These adults only reinforce their children's attraction to a group of men clinging to their connections with the skateboarding subculture and their middle-class normalcy, in spite of professional success, in order to maintain a certain street credibility. They maintain an aggressively amateurish aesthetic to preserve their mobility through urban spaces and continue their skater project of appropriating such public spaces for their own purposes—violating the mobile private spheres, which allow the middle- and upper-classes to cruise complacently through public areas.

The Jackasses are an all male, all white, formerly middle-, now upper-class group, more than subtextually fixated on each other's genitalia. Without the help of corporate giant MTV they would have no more voice than the skaters who use the fountains and concrete in public parks and college campuses to express themselves. However much they might be speaking from a position of inherent power, the cast and crew of *Jackass* seem to understand these contradictions and mock themselves for these same reasons. A voice or a video practice calling for social mobility and civic participation should not be silent for fear of being used to market MTV. If that were the case, all the humor and disruption of *Jackass* would be contained in a fairly small, exclusive (compared to television) world of skateboarding and any project the *Jackass* crew had would never have been acknowledged.

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NOTES

[1] TRL is the acronym for Total Request Live, MTV's Carson Daly-hosted call-in show that plays the top ten videos of the day. Screaming fans surround Daly and his pop star guests as well as waving signs and occasionally introducing a video from the streets below the Times Square studio.

[2] Biographical information from Elwell-Sutton, Chris. "The Bad Taste Boys." *The Times of London*. 17 Feb 2003. Features, Times2, p14.

[3] Douglas Kellner. "*Beavis and Butt-head*: No Future for Postmodern Youth." In *Television: The Critical View*, 6th Edition. Horace Newcomb, ed. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp319-329.

[4] "The Toupee." Scene 24, *Jackass Volume Three*. Perf. Rick Kosick, Johnny Knoxville, Bam Margera, Steve-O. MTV, 2002.

[5] "Ice Barrel Jumping." Scene 4, *Jackass Volume Three*. Perf. Johnny Knoxville, Bam Margera, Steve-O. MTV, 2002. MTV, 2002.

[6] Maya Deren. "Amateur Versus Professional." *Film Comment* vol. 39, 1965, pp45-46.

[7] Jonas Mekas. "The Diary Film: A Lecture on *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*." In *The Avant-Garde Film: a Reader of Theory and Criticism*. Anthology Film Archives Series: 3. P. Adams Sitney, ed. New York: New York University Press, 1978. pp190-198.

[8] *Jackass: the Movie*. Dir. Jeff Tremaine. Perf. Johnny Knoxville, Bam Margera, Steve-O. MTV and Paramount, 2002 Director commentary. *Jackass: the Movie*. Dir. Jeff Tremaine. Perf. Johnny Knoxville, Bam Margera, Steve-O. MTV Home Video, 2003.

[10] Dogma 95's official website, http://www.dogme95.dk, is not functioning. While it is perhaps merely a technical malfunction, I believe it's possible Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, the authors of the Vow of Chastity, bought the domain name and put nothing there, in an effort to prevent commercialization and cosmeticization of their project and to thwart Internet users seeking information passively from their consoles rather than engaging with the here and now world around them as they advocate in their filmmaking manifesto. The full text of the Vow and the Declaration of Dogma 95 can be found at http://www.martweiss.com/film/dogma95.shtml or http://imv.au.dk/publikationer/pov/Issue_10/section_1/artc1A.html among others. Also, Dogma is clearly not a truly authorless project since its own manifesto has credited authors and its filmmakers do things like write "confessions" of their violations of the Vow in the LAWeekly. See Vinterberg, Thomas. "A Confession." *LA Weekly*. 23-29 October 1998 or http://www.laweekly.com/ink/98/48/film-vinterberg.php.

[11]See http://www.arts.ucsb.edu/projects/mpart/about/about_frames.html for more details of the GALA Committee's project.

[12] Raymond Williams. *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. New York: Schocken Books, 1974. Ch1.

[13] Lynn Spigel. *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2001. p72.

[14] Margaret Morse. "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall and Television." In *Logics of Television*. Patricia Mellencamp, ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1990. pp193-221.

[15] Cubitt, Sean. *Timeshift: On Video Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. p1.

[16] "Fighting Hockey Players." Scene 4, *Jackass Volume Two*. Perf. Johnny Knoxville, Bam Margera, Steve-O. MTV, 2002.

[17] "Broken Arm." Scene 9, *Jackass Volume Two*. Perf. Johnny Knoxville, Bam Margera, Steve-O. MTV, 2002.

[18] Cubitt, p2.

[19]The most well known case is that of a young boy who tried to duplicate Johnny Knoxville's "Human Barbeque" stunt in which Knoxville jumped on a giant grill with meat strapped all over his body. The difference was that Knoxville wore a flame proof suit and the boy did not. The case sparked discussion on CNN's *Talkback Live* April 25, 2001 as well as remarks from Sen. Joe Lieberman (D, CT). It is described in some detail in Beato, G. "The New Johnny Rotten." *The Guardian*. 21 Feb 2003, Guardian Friday Pages, p12.

[20] Roland Barthes defines the readerly text in opposition to the writerly text in *S/Z*. Richard Miller, trans. New York: Hill & Wang, 1974. p4.

[21] Of course, as with all reality TV, we discover sooner or later (with *Jackass* all it takes is listening to the DVD commentaries or watching the outtakes from *Jackass: the Movie*) that it is not real or spontaneous at all. There are flubs in the segment introductions, there are stunts that do not work the first time (in "The Bungee Wedgie," for example, we learn that the second attempt actually uses four pair of underpants to achieve a successful bungee effect) and there is extensive planning involved in positioning cameras to capture each angle or reaction shot.

[22] Bill Nichols. *Blurred Boundaries*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, p45.

[23] Nichols, p51.

[24] "Bounty Hunter." Scene 1, *Jackass Volume Three*. Perf. Brandon DiCamillo, Johnny Knoxville, Bam Margera, Steve-O. MTV, 2002.

[25] Kathleen Rowe. "Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess." *Screen*. Vol. 31, no. 4, 1990.

[26]*Jackass: the Movie*. Scenes 32 and 38. Dir. Jeff Tremaine. Perf. Johnny Knoxville, Bam Margera, Steve-O. MTV and Paramount, 2002.